Jazz Periodicals

Much of the scholarship and criticism concerning America's popular arts has been the work of amateurs. Traditionally accepted academic institutions have too often resisted or decried or simply ignored historical or analytical approaches to broadly appealing cultural forms and their close relatives. Meanwhile, commercial publishing interests have usually treated popular art glibly and sensationally, overemphasizing its most popular figures and its latest fashions, and stressing the eccentricities and personal problems of all concerned.

All of these conditions have applied in the case of jazz, and thus, it is that many jazz-oriented periodicals (including many of those reproduced in microform by Greenwood Press) have been produced by enthusiasts with serious intentions, working in their spare time with little in the way of financial resources. Not surprisingly, these enthusiast periodicals were often unprepossessing -- not to say unprofessional -- in appearance; and in a good many cases, their appearances reflected their true value. Yet points of interest appear even in the briefest-lived and most ephemeral of these publications, and their more interesting counterparts are troves for any student of American music.

The reader will note that most of the journals in the Greenwood series began publication between 1938 and 1950. Just before this period, the general public's interest in jazz had increased substantially; the jazz-based "swing" dance-band style became dominant in popular music just before World War II. Correspondingly, the Chicago-based trade journal down beat became national in scope within a couple of

years of its founding in 1934; Metronome, originally a "classical" music periodical when founded in 1885, began devoting more and more space to popular music; and a series of flimsy fan magazines began to rise and fall. But along with the more broadly based entertainment trade journals (Variety, Billboard, Orchestra World), a handful of general interest magazines (chiefly Esquire and The New Republic) and several Negro newspapers in large cities, down beat and Metronome sated the appetites of the music industry and the mass audience for information on the "swing" craze.

At the same time, however, a more accurate consciousness of the historic background and aesthetic identity of jazz was growing among a smaller group of listeners. In 1936, the English translation of Hugues Panassie's 1934 overview Hot Jazz provided a rallying point for a jazz aesthetic based upon common practice and the work of major performers. In the same year, Hilton Schleman's Rhythm on Record and Charles Delaunay's Hot Discography laid the procedural groundwork for a comprehensive catalogue of jazz recordings -- still the most valuable documents of the music and its history. For nearly six years beginning in 1935, Panassie and Delaunay together edited Jazz Hot, a bilingual French monthly that followed the newly identified musical trend. And in 1939, the anthology Jazzmen (edited and partly written by Frederic Ramsey, Jr., and Charles Edward Smith) established an historic perspective on the fast-changing jazz world.

The attitudes found in Hot Jazz and Jazzmen can be found between the lines of most of the "little" jazz magazines of the 1940s. The music associated with New Orleans tended to be prized above later stylistic developments. Improvisation and the small group were usually regarded as intrinsically superior to the written musical arrangement

and the large orchestra. Several magazines gave most or all of their space to printing discographical research. (Much of this research has been reprinted or corrected in Brian Rust's Jazz Records 1897-1942, J. G. Jepsen's Jazz Records series, or other now-standard sources. However, the earlier research retains some interest, since many discographical matters remain open to dispute.) And perhaps inevitably, as jazz continued to develop in the 1940s, most of the "little" magazines acquired a reactionary tone. While Metronome espoused newer music fervently and sometimes uncritically, and down beat (at the time, the most musician-oriented of the trade journals) emphasized the fading but still highly commercial "swing" style, enthusiast journals tended to denigrate both in favor of the "real" jazz -- sometimes revealingly referred to as "righteous." By the mid-1950s, their historical and critical roles fulfilled, most of the "little" jazz magazine had lost vitality and passed from the scene.

Amateur jazz periodicals established after the 1940s have usually been more broadly tolerant than their earlier counterparts (though understandably tending to emphasize more recent music). However, nearly all jazz periodicals, with the exception of the remarkable Jazz Review (1958-1961), could have done more to solicit articles from practicing musicians, and from black commentators, thus avoiding biases and omissions which are often embarrassingly evident to present-day readers. (At least two black-controlled jazz magazines -- the Music Dial and Riff -- existed in the 1940s, but attempts to locate copies of these for microfilming have so far proved unsuccessful.) Despite all their musical, social and financial limitations, the early enthusiast magazines carried far more than their share of the burden of jazz studies,

and they are essential to any comprehensive library on music.

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JAZZ INFORMATION
Vols 1-2/No.16, September 1939-November 1941 (all published; frequency varies), New York.

Jazz Information began as a slender news weekly in the fall of 1939. Besides news of which bands were playing the "real" jazz and where they might be heard in the New York area, it included record reviews and brief articles -- some of a critical nature. The editors were Eugene Williams, Ralph J. Gleason and Ralph de Toledano; other contributors included Frederic Ramsey, Walter Schaap, William Russell, John Steiner and Orin Blackstone. After a brief hiatus in the summer of 1940, Jazz Information resumed publication as a much thicker bi-weekly. Williams was now the dominant editorial force; George Avakian contributed record reviews; and articles of interest appeared on New Orleans clarinetists (series), on Henry "Red" Allen's return to New Orleans, on James P. Johnson (written by Ross Russell) and on a variety of discographical matters. But publication stopped again early in 1941, and Williams was able to produce only one more issue (an outsize issue, to be sure) in November of the same year. Along with HRS Rag, Jazz Information set the pattern of format, for subject matter and tone for most of the enthusiast jazz magazines of the 1940s.

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